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ABSTRACT

Operation Rescue is a teacher-initiated and -managed early intervention program to identify and help potential dropouts. The program relies upon establishing one-to-one friendships between at-risk children and volunteers. Cooperation with community groups promotes the goal of "local groups solving local problems." Operation Rescue sponsors activities and provides services to promote parent and community involvement. Operation Rescue attributes its success on a low-budget to enthusiastic volunteers, parent participation, and cooperation with other community groups. (LMI)

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OPERATION RESCUE, CORSICANA
AN EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAM

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I am Sue Guinn, a third grade teacher in Corsicana. I am also the Project Director of Operation Rescue, an early intervention program in the lives of children who are at-risk of dropping out of school.

Operation Rescue received a grant for \$5,000 in 1987 from the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education, a branch of the National Education Association. In 1988 we received a \$10,000 grant from NFIE to continue our program. NFIE gives grants for a maximum of two years to local NEA affiliates who operate programs to help at-risk children. The Foundation stresses the importance of local people working together to solve local problems. Operation Rescue, in conjunction with the Corsicana Independent School District, parent organizations, community service clubs, churches and other educational institutions is a project that adheres to the "local people helping solve local problems" adage.

We first learned about NFIE grants at a Texas State Teachers Association State Convention in Lubbock, Texas in 1987. Several of our local association members attended a workshop on at-risk children. Also in attendance was a school board member from our district. After discussing the need for an at-risk program in Corsicana, these local leaders began writing a grant proposal. We researched the community and school district to see if there was support and were overwhelmed with the enthusiasm for such a project.

Our local school administration gave us freedom to do whatever we felt was necessary and worthwhile.

We really got started in the fall of 1987. Letters were sent to all educators in the system detailing the program and asking if they would like to become a volunteer for Operation Rescue. Our program hinges on one-on-one contact with an at-risk child by an adult. Initially we had only educators who volunteered but as we worked with the program we began serving as speakers to local community service groups and getting our message out to the community. Again we were overwhelmed with the support given and promised.

As stated earlier, the main emphasis is to provide at-risk students with a special friend, the volunteer, with whom the child will form a personal bond. Activities are planned by the Operation Rescue Board of Directors, plus individuals do many personal activities with their child/children. These activities are fun and educational. They provide experiences the children would otherwise not have. Some group activities provided have been bowling, entering the Corsicana city-wide Christmas parade, having Santa come for the Christmas party, attending the Community Theater several times, providing art lessons, attending the Navarro County Livestock Exposition, watching the Dallas Cowboys play in a benefit basketball game, choosing books from school Book Fairs, attending the Ringling Bros. Circus, going to the Texas State Fair, sponsoring a family night Thanksgiving

Dinner, participating in the anti-drug Hands Around Corsicana rally, singing carols at local nursing homes. providing tickets to local events and sponsoring a city wide Field Day to raise money for the Camp of the Rising Sun, a camp for handicapped children.

Volunteers also do many individual activities along with their frequent contact with their adoptees. Many children have experienced eating out, shopping in a mall, seeing a ball game and being a part of a typical family for the very first time.

We hold several volunteer training sessions during the year. These sessions have been held during the school day with Operation Rescue paying for substitutes and at night for those people who could not be off during the day. At each training session we have a set program. Volunteers learn about the dropout problem in the state and nation, how Operation Rescue works, receive guidelines for volunteers and explanations of the material included in their notebook, learn how to deal with parents and family members, receive a print out of services available in the community to use if they discover needs not being met in the child's family, and just what is expected of them as volunteers.

Our children are selected from referrals sent to me from teachers and administrators. Many volunteers pick children that are in their school. We encourage this because of the availability of closer contact. After a child has been

selected, the volunteer makes personal contact with the parent, explains the program to the parent, and receives permission from the parent for the child to be involved in Operation Rescue. A question that sometimes arises is "Don't parents resent someone coming in and taking over their child?" My answer is always no, because after explaining the program to the parent, they understand that the volunteer is there to help the child and the whole family if necessary. We are not saying the parent is not doing a good job, but that we want to help. We have not had any problems with parents resenting this intrusion in their life. We have had parents ask us to "adopt" a brother, sister, or cousin in addition to the identified child.

Parent workshops, held by Operation Rescue Board members, inform parents on nutrition, alcohol and drug abuse, study habits, school rules, and provide a forum for parents to discuss school problems. In our Hispanic community we hold the program in both English and Spanish. The first meeting we had was a learning experience for all of us. We were the program for a PTO meeting and after the children had sung, the principal spoke. The noise level was so high that we became afraid the parents would not stay, much less listen. However, when I began to speak, followed by an interpretation by another volunteer, the room became very quiet. The majority of the people could now understand what was going on. We divided the audience into those that

wanted to hear the program in English and those who wanted it in Spanish. My English program was over in about 30 minutes and I went into the Spanish speaking session. These people stayed another hour. For the first time, there was someone who they could relate their fears and problems to, who could understand them. It was an eye-opener for us also. We discovered that parents in that school were not apathetic like we had thought, they just didn't know what the school system wanted them to do. Through this one program we now get notes from school printed in Spanish, have a large group of Hispanic parent volunteers in that school, have expanded the ESL program there, have hired additional Spanish speaking aides, and have hired Hispanic teachers so these children can have role models. Operation Rescue has provided information to Anglo teachers on how to deal with Hispanic children and parents, and on cultural differences. Workshops have also been provided to these parents on childhood illnesses, immunizations, and medical care that is available.

Parents are contacted by the volunteer before taking the child to any activity. Volunteers also visit the homes and have become friends or advisors to many of these parents. Last year we felt that parents of our at-risk children should get together and meet each other. We invited the whole family of each child to a Thanksgiving Dinner at one of our middle schools. The response was more than we

expected. The appreciation and "we're working in this altogether" attitude was evident.

Our volunteers are provided several helpful brochures to involve parents in helping their child at home with school work, parent-teacher conferences, reading, television, etc. We have them printed in both English and Spanish.

This past spring we sponsored a Parent Information Fair at one of our elementary schools. This school is in the predominately Black community. Community organizations such as the Library, Ex-student associations, Boy Scouts, Camp Fire, Police Dept. D.A.R.E. program, Emergency Medical Service, Navarro Regional Hospital, the Warehouse Living Arts, and Alcohol Anonymous provided free materials and services. We worked out an agreement with the hospital to conduct very inexpensive sickle cell tests, EMS did blood pressure checks, and hot dogs and drinks were provided for 25 cents. Not only did we use this opportunity to get information to the parents but it also encouraged the parent to come to the school and become a part of their child's education.

For the past two years Operation Rescue has held a FUNtastic Day. It is a day where children can participate in field events, games, and fun activities. The proceeds from this day are given to the Camp of the Rising Sun. This is a camp that Corsicana's handicapped children can attend in the

summer. Our identified children and parents use this opportunity to help other children less fortunate and give something back to a community that has given them so much during the year.

Materials for our program come from many sources. Navarro College, has made two videos that we use with parents and community organizations to highlight our program. Parental Involvement videos have also been purchased from the NEA Professional Library. Operation Rescue Board members have compiled a listing of all services available in the city by name, service, and who to contact. We order pamphlets from the International Reading Council, Texas State Teachers Association, and also use state and national drug agencies.

We feel our program is very successful. Successes cannot be measured by a paper and pencil assessment. Scores cannot measure accurately the rise in self-esteem nor the bond that develops between the volunteers, parents, and the children. Positive responses and changes in attitude and behavior are our best measures. You can't score the smile on a child's face when, for the first time, he sits in Santa's lap, rides an elevator, gets an autograph from a Dallas Cowboy or participates in a parade. We've seen many succsses. We are going to see more. Letters from parents thanking us for working with their children, grades improving, and children beginning to take a more active part in school and schoool

activities are our successes .Volunteer families have been enhanced by having a child who is less fortunate join in their family activities. We've heard children say "I have two sets of parents. My Special Friends and my real parents."

A significant part of our program has been the bonding of the educational community with the lay community. Our local Chamber of Commerce has been a great help. I serve on the education committee and members of the chamber promote our program in many ways.

This year we start our third year in the project. Funding for this year, \$10,000, was given by the Formby Foundation in Austin. Operation Rescue is a low budget project because its primary resource is the volunteer. With this latest grant we will be able to continue. Our future depends on encouraging these at-risk children to become strong productive citizens.

Presently, we have forty active volunteers working with sixty identified children. Our activities many times include more than our identified children. Our volunteers include the superintendent, principals, central office staff, teachers, support personnel and community people.

In December we had an entry in the Corsicana Christmas Parade, attended the Living Christmas Tree at the First Baptist Church and attended the "Littlest Angel" play at the

Warehouse Living Arts Center. Individual volunteers supplied various activities for their children.

Saturday, February 10, Operation Rescue sponsored a skating party for our identified children. Since most of these children never get to invite anyone to "their" party, we allowed each child to invite one guest. One hundred and ten children and volunteers enjoyed an afternoon of skating!

We have had more requests for clothing this year than ever before. Volunteers purchase clothing through regular stores or most often through a resale store. We have been able to get a lot of clothes for the money.

We have worked through several agencies to aid children with medical problems. One of our children has severe allergy problems. By working with her doctor and the county health nurse, Operation Rescue was able to pay for her shots for one year for only \$66. We also aided the grandmother in getting assistance for the family. We are continuing to help several other children with medical problems and vision problems.

We have received requests from several agencies and individuals for information concerning Operation Rescue. Information has been sent to the Dropout Clearing House in Austin and we are in the process of supplying information to ERIC Clearing House on Educational Management. We are also considering printing an information flier.

For the past several months we have been seeking help with child abuse cases. We are planning to secure training for all teachers in recognizing child abuse and aiding the victim and family. We are also looking into group counseling for our Operation Rescue children. Operation Rescue and many community leaders will be participating in a new program called New Focus. Training will be provided at a minimal expense. We think this will be a good project because it will bring many problems with the youth to the attention of influential people. These people will also be involved in a more personal way than ever before.

Operation Rescue volunteers helped the Navarro County Drug and Alcohol Abuse Committee by providing child care and refreshments to Hispanic children during a workshop held on February 8.

Last year Operation Rescue was visited by a team from the National Research Council. We were selected as one of 13 exemplary volunteer programs in the nation. Secretary of Education Cavazos' office called to alert us that a press conference would be held on Monday February 12. The committee's report on exemplary programs, "Volunteers in Public Schools" was released at that time. Several members of the Chamber of Commerce Education Committee participated in interviews with the National Research Council team. We were very pleased with the coverage given to the project.

The book is available from the National Academy Press, 2101 Constitution Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20418. The cost is \$12.50 plus \$2.00 shipping and handling.

Funding for this year came from the Forby Foundation in Austin. We received \$10,000 to operate our program.

Operation Rescue is a teacher initiated and teacher managed project.

Corsicana is a city of about 25,000 people. Operation Rescue is but one of the projects in our city that involves parents and the schools. The Chamber of Commerce started a Partners in Education program three years ago. This program joins the schools and industry or business together. Each of our schools has a partner and some have as many as three. These partners do a variety of things. In the eighth grade center, Guardian Glass, offers tours, hands on experience for the students in seeing how computers are a part of their industry, and incentives for perfect attendance and higher grades. One thing they do for perfect attendance is to give helicopter rides to the students in the company helicopter. Liberty Mutual Insurance Company allows their employees to spend time during the work day tutoring students at Fannin Elementary. They also send volunteers to the Special Education Water Therapy classes to provide one-on-one help in the pool. Brookshires' Foods have two supermarkets in town and each one is a partner. They provide food for Fun Nights, parties, and supplies for special events.

Brookshires' also gives teachers store decorations and marketing displays that can be used in the classroom. Texas Utilities is a "floating" partner. They work in several schools and provide programs and help as requested. The Fire Department is a partner with special education. Bucket rides and firetruck rides are very exciting to these children. Altogether we have about 25 partners that work in our six elementaries, two middle schools, special education center, and high school. Educators serve on the Chamber education committee and evaluate programs and activities.

The New Focus Program is an idea that is being considered at this time. New Focus Community Action Program provides training to assist communities in dealing with the pressures and decisions our young people face. New Focus is a process of moving people toward Internal Management. Internal Management generates self control and accountability which motivates people to take responsibility for their lives. School personnel and community leaders are interested in this program because it is a total community involvement program that we hope will help our young people. Internal Management is a learned skill that our young people can be taught. It reaches to the very root of our being. Feelings such as love, courage, meaning, purpose, happiness, patriotism, integrity, dignity, and respect are the result and outgrowth of Internal Management. New Focus trains

adults not only to identify high risk externally managed youth but also how to move them toward internal management.

Most of our elementary schools have an active parent volunteer program. At the beginning of school letters go home with each child asking parents to sign up as a parent volunteer. There are many options parents can choose. Reading to children in a classroom, helping one-on-one, making educational games, organizing supplies for art or other classroom projects, helping in the library, working in the school store, and sharing their individual talents or hobbies are but a few of the ways our parents work in the school. We welcome parents in our school and in our individual classrooms. This on the spot look at what is happening is an eye opener for many parents. Many of the same problems are around now that were there when they were in school but we have lots of new ones to deal with now. The more informed parents are, the more supportive they will be. Studies have shown that children whose parents are involved in schools, do better. When parents are in the classroom it goes beyond cookies and cash. They can see how children learn and this helps them with their own children.

Navarro College has just begun a new program. It is a parenting class. The three local organizations which are sponsoring the series are all concerned about difficulties that occur in all families, and they are attempting to implement an on-going program of instruction to help parents

do a better job of communicating with, teaching facts and values to, and empathizing with their children.

The fee for the course is only twenty dollars for all six meetings. A workbook and activity guide are included in the workshop. Teachers in this course are trained counselors and specialists in their field. Dr. Richard Miller, a psychologist and college instructor, is leading the sessions which include lecture, video instruction, discussion, and activities. The class will meet one night a week for six weeks. Some of the sessions will be open for people who are not regularly enrolled to attend. Thirty one people attended the first meeting and several others are expected for the second session bringing the enrollment to its recommended capacity of forty people. The participants represent a variety of socio-economic and racial backgrounds. Some are attending on scholarships provided by the sponsoring organizations and local businesses.

Planning for the series of events was accomplished by a committee of eight people representing the sponsoring organizations: The Navarro County Drug and Alcohol Abuse Committee, the Jackson Ex-Students Association, and the Education committee of the Corsicana Area Chamber of Commerce.

Navarro feels that teaching parents specific skills in interacting with their children will improve the

relationship for both parents and children. Dr. Miller, who is also a family counselor, believes that there is nothing more important than instilling proper values and skills into the lives of the parents who lead today's families.

Project Graduation was started about three years ago. The Navarro County Drug Abuse Committee sponsors this event. During the year high school students raise money through projects to pay for a band, food, and decorations. These are used on the night of graduation for a special chemical free night for the kids. Students who stayed all night this year were eligible to win a new car. Each year this well planned and chaperoned party gets larger. During these three years we have not had a death or accident due to chemical abuse on graduation night. It is now the "in" thing to go to instead of driving to Dallas, Ft. Worth or a secluded field.

Principally Speaking was the title of an elementary school principal's letter that went to parents each six weeks in the report card. Dr. Alexander retired this year but hopefully the new principal will carry on this letter. Each letter had a theme titled Special Thoughts on Raising Kids. The letter would deal with a specific topic such as Setting Limits and used simple, effective ways to help parents deal with situations that happen at home..

This year we are using bilingual tutors in one of our elementary schools. This is the first time Hispanic parents have served in this capacity. We feel that it will not only help the child but will also educate teachers and other parents as to the needs and problems of children and families who have suddenly been thrust into a totally different culture and must learn to adapt quickly. This same school is now finalizing plans for an after school program. This time will be used for tutoring and providing activities that will help those attending. The targeted child is the one who is now going home to an empty house or to a troubled home.

Navarro College and the Jackson Ex-Students Association of Corsicana jointly have been awarded a grant from the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse to develop a model project for substance abuse prevention programs for youths and young adults in a rural area. Project PRIDE will serve as a substance abuse clearing house as well as a smorgasbord approach to prevention, intervention, and alternatives to chemical abuse.

Corsicana is truly a city that believes that parental involvement in the schools is essential. Our school letterhead says "Educating toward Excellence". We are doing our best to do that. As educators we know that we can not do this job alone. We must have the help and support of

parents and of the community. We want parents to help with "cookies and cash", but we also want them to be involved in the institution that in this day and time, has the most influence on our most precious natural resource. That resource is children.